

The Threshold of Nirvana

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THE
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OF
NIRVANA

BY
MAY CUMMINGS.



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THE THRESHOLD OF NIRVANA

The hour was nearing eleven, and the pulse of tropic India was slackening for its midday drowse. The parakeet of the outer palace court blinked silently from his perch and the peacock had sought the grateful shade of the wall. The inner court was a more favored spot, for there thick foliaged vines turned their sinuous length about every pillar; and tendril clasping tendril across space formed a canopy of massed leafage, bud and bloom. Dark green shadows lent the illusion of coolness accentuated by theplash and tinkle of the fountain, save which the silence was unbroken; a profound stillness not to be expected in a schoolroom—and this is none other than the Place of Learning.

“Ayah, ayah, do not be tiresome—I heard you the first time!”

“But tasks should be over, pretty one. We must go away to the robing. It is the luncheon hour.”

In tones soft yet insistent the Hindu nurse pleads at the ear of her wilful charge.

“Not until I make it complete: the thought. You do not understand.”

The lithe, rounded form half rose and then sank back in a rapt attitude; the left hand was clenched, as if in desperation, while the fingers of the right were cramped awkwardly about the pen poised over a manuscript on the desk before her—a sheet of paper zigzagged with crude scrawls meant for writing. With patient devotion the ayah bent over the bowed form, waving, waving her ever-present fan gently, oh, so gently, as if to waft away care from that young brow. Alas, within those dark, oriental eyes the soul-thirst had kindled fires of perpetual unrest, a deathless quest.

The third occupant of the court was Roger Innesley, A. M., English tutor to Vidharra, daughter of Rajah Sindh. Perfunctorily polite, he gave no sign of impatience toward his perverse pupil, whose tasks were never completed “on time.” Calm and dignified, as befitting his calling, he sat erect in a most luxurious desk-chair, his gaze apparently fixed on the row of “English Classics” within easy reach. His high-bred, rather aquiline features wore an expres-

sion of abstraction deepened by the far-away look in the dark-gray eyes. Whatever his concern might be, it was not the mental wrestlings of Vidharra with the closing sentence of her English composition.

But the end was achieved somehow and the meagre offering submitted apologetically to the master of tasks, who was all deference in regard to the few thin pages of parchment.

“Many gracious thanks, your ladyship. Very well done. Tomorrow I bring them revised, and perhaps we rewrite the thoughts my way—we shall talk them over together.”

“Together”—magic word! It was pure joy animating that crimson tide suffusing the clear olive of cheek and brow that gave the likeness of some glowing tropic flower.

“There are so many mistakes; I cannot write your English ever,” faltered the sweet, plaintive tones as, acknowledging the courteous bow of the Englishman, she turned to follow her serving-woman.

To one emerging from the cool greenness of that most unique schoolroom the glare of the sun-parched earth was almost intolerable, but Roger Innesley’s straight figure swung along through the white, hot dust with its usual ath-

letic stride. As a member of the faculty of Mithratta Mission College he had received an invitation to luncheon at the home of Dr. Weer, president of the institution. "*En famille*" the note had read, and no one would be present except the doctor and his niece, Miriam Olcott, who had come from the home-land but recently to take charge of a new training school for native nurses—an important auxiliary to the mission hospital. Recollections of previous meetings with this young lady set him wondering whether she would be in one of her *distracte* moods, all the while vaguely conscious that her mood should make no difference to him.

At his quarters he tarried only long enough to lay aside his teacher's portfolio and make himself presentable; then hastening to the bungalow, beneath a giant banyan, where true English hospitality bade every comer welcome.

The good old doctor was pacing the veranda, his spare form erect, white hair swept back from a most noble brow, from beneath which shone eyes that had caught the Beatific Vision. "A saintly face," thought Roger Innesley as that rare smile greeted him from the steps.

Miss Olcott, as she came forward in the tiny reception room, offered him her hand with un-

wonted cordiality, and he felt relieved that the dreaded explanation of his tardiness did not have to be made during luncheon.

"Was there an air of apprehension about the host, at odds with his gayety of mien?" the guest asked himself, and sought to silence the premonitions rising within him by remarking the beauty and domesticity of the bungalow interior. Cool, gray-blues and sea-greens in color-tones, diaphanous draperies, light basketry furniture, sparkling crystal and silver—each and all lent of their charm to the effect of artistic "homeyness": an emanation from and fit setting for that stately woman robed in white, wearing her coronet of golden hair like a very queen.

"My dear Roger, I trust you have forgotten the forlorn state of this abode, this very room, six months ago, when Miriam took pity on her incorrigible bachelor uncle."

The guest murmured some polite commonplace in an effort to follow the desired lead, and chanced to note Miss Olcott's gaze fixed on the movements of the butler, or general servitor, whose flapping sandals and trouser-legs were disappearing through the doorway.

"You agree now, Uncle, that Gaschal gives better service than Koosh?" with an eager suddenness.

"Yes, yes; have capitulated long ago. We are greatly blessed in all these changes. Do you know," addressing the guest, "this formidable young person has discharged our Hindu cook and now the butler, replacing them with these half-caste, semi-foreigners, so regarded because of the French admixture? There are many such on this province."

"These Indo-French have no standing among the native Hindus. Race prejudice, engendered by the French occupation of this region, still persists—to the confusion of missionaries. Banyah and Siska were perpetually spying upon one another and telling, but Gaschal is dependable and loyal, I feel sure. Pardon my bringing on these domestic broils."

"Your word 'loyal,'" said Innesley, "reveals the depth of the situation. Loyalty: does it exist in the absolute? Can the heritors of a mystic past, minds enmeshed in Brahmanism, comprehend altruistic loyalty? Blind devotion to the egoistic faith that achieves Nirvana is all-pervading, all-enthralling, because all-alluring."

"True, true," rejoined Dr. Weer, "the current is age, long-age, strong; but we have set its course homeward. There is something in the heathen heart unsatisfied with Nirvana — the

impulse to *do*, that he may *be*. That little spark of creative fire divinely implanted in every human soul is being kindled into ambition to individualize personality, the future starter. But I did not intend a harangue. I am growing old and garrulous."

At this juncture ices and fruit appeared, and Roger found new interest in the deft-handed butler who had been adjudged "loyal." What a marvel to read the Celtic strain in that Asiatic type—depth of eye, arch of nostril, length of line about cheek, and chin all bespoke intelligence and stability!

The post-prandial chat on the veranda was of necessity brief. Afternoon sessions called each to his post of duty, and hours of toil awaited the workers in the mission field of various activities at Mithratta.

At the close of the final class period Professor Innesley addressed himself to his usual task of correction of themes for the day. Involuntarily he selected first the one marked *Vidharra English*. "Singular fortune," he mused, "to be tutor to the daughter of a Hindu Rajah (in title at least)." Since his conversion his Highness has adopted European customs with an enthusiasm his fat, round countenance does not betray.

How far this favoring higher education for women is influenced by principle and how far by ambition for worldly advancement; the wisest of sages could not determine. It is a pleasure to teach the charming child along the line of her real interest—romanticism, of course. How she has striven for self-expression in this:

The Lily Maid of Astolat.

"So like a lily flower, Elaine. Very sad it was, and cruel too, that she should be as in a prison kept. The father and brothers were Christian knights and had much joy in the tournaments. Her they bade be content in the dark castle. Sir Launcelot was mean with the deceit in his heart. Guinevere had the angry spite. Elaine was of the faithful heart, she suffer so she die. Her spirit suffer till it find Nirvana."

The last word was startling. This from an orthodox Christian convert! And in such a frank manner! Yet, why surprised? Rather the deep pity that any man worthy of the name feels for all women worthy and unworthy. Inadvertently, perhaps, in that last sentence Viddhara had vouched the primitive sense of soul-scar. To this Hindu maiden the wound of true love scorned was a cankering blight, ne'er healed outside the threshold of Nirvana. A mist before the master's eyes blurred the scrawled lines, with

their blots and erasures. Conscience-smitten he winced at the recollection of this trusting child's halting, painful efforts toward the light of learning. The wan face and burning eyes had been pitiful to see, the strain of flagging powers under the lash of will. Dearly bought, this fatal knowledge of the world's way—the way of woe for womankind.

These meditations were interrupted by the arrival of a messenger bearing the customary "request to be present" at a called meeting of the faculty. That meant hours of desk-work to complete the daily routine in time to attend. Harassed by fatigue, his spirit rebelled against the loss of his evening.

Promptly at eight o'clock the meeting was convened and its purpose stated by Dr. Weer. Within the past twenty-four hours he had been apprised of disaffection among the natives employed on the estates belonging to the institution, and by means of trusty servants in his own household had traced the disturbing element to a very unexpected source.

Pausing a moment, as becomes the harbinger of ill-omen, the speaker voiced his fateful discovery. "The storm-center is in Rajah Sindh's palace." The wave of alarm that swept over

the little assembly was succeeded by the tension of alertness as the calm voice went on: "Rajah Sindh is a devout and pious worshiper in our chapel. The price paid for the old temple and adjacent lands seemed to satisfy his greed, and his position as local magistrate affords him pomp and the semblance of power. However, his cherished revenge for the fate of his son—will you state your recollection of the circumstances, Dr. Carleton?"

The head surgeon's statement was brief. The lad was brought to the hospital suffering from a fevered wound, the result of a brawl with some of the soldiery. The combined skill of the whole staff could not save his life.

"In my opinion," continued Dr. Weer, "the plot is yet in its incipiency. The syces and gardeners have obtained the dregs of the Rajah's wine casks, and race prejudice was momentarily drowned in conviviality, so Gaschal says. A few words of dire import were uttered: 'We have much feasting and dancing when the English are no more.' Gentlemen, I rely upon your advice in the presence of possible disaster."

Professor Blake addressed the chair with his characteristic practicality: "Rajah Sindh should be placed under arrest by the constabulary and

the nearest military guard summoned to take charge until this mystery is cleared up."

"Not quite feasible, Professor, as his Excellency is away from home, probably being entertained in state by some petty potentate of a neighboring province."

"Or lying hidden within his own walls, with his spies prowling beneath our windows, lurking in every shadow. With your permission, I shall communicate with the commandant at once and have a cordon of regulars drawn up about the palace of Sindh and the entire household put under surveillance. We must not let any notions of chivalry exempt the royal lady daughter and her devoted ayah. Professor Innesley has the honor to be her tutor; he may have observed her qualities of sincerity and loyalty—or their opposites?"

All the while Roger Innesley had been silently on the defensive against this question, and now felt relieved that it was not direct. He felt a rising indignation at the least suspicion against this innocent child, though as untouched by Christian faith as when she sang in the temple choir with other vestals of her rank. A mere sign of negation, courteously disclaiming any knowledge on the subject, was enough to deliver him over to his own conscience.

A plan of vigilance was adopted and the meeting adjourned, each member taking his separate way homeward.

Breathless with the rapidity of ascent, Innesley paused on an eminence in the road winding upward to the palace. His highly wrought mental state was keyed to the sense of solitude under the open sky at midnight in India. Far, far away the Himalayas reared their huge, jagged crests against the sky. Along their giant sides floated and hung masses of billowy cloud, over which the heat-lightning played in fitful flames. Dark yawned the ravines among the hills, and the rice fields lay in dense blackness threaded by tiny rivulets silvered by the tropic moon.

Hearing footsteps, he turned to encounter his most intimate co-worker, Dr. Carleton. Neither expressed surprise, as they were of one accord in watchfulness tonight.

“Do not let me disturb your musings. This is a night when the stress of civilized life drives us to the open.”

“Where one may ponder the mysticism of this Land of the Brooding Spirit.”

“Spirit of what?”

“The All-Absorbing Immanence of Being, Nirvana, if you will.”

“Spirit of Indolence and Sloth. The Hindu has grown so accustomed to doing nothing all his life that he can think of no more blissful way of spending eternity.”

“I respect your sane, common-sense solution, but this belief in Nirvana, in the All One, has its charm. Remember the lines:

“Thy soul goes gladly forth
To mix with God, sole Being, and live in Him,
Yielding its tribute to the Universal Mind.
A spirit atom in the Eternal One,
Serving the more high destiny to swell
The bliss of Being which alone can be.”

“Logical result of climate and the caste system, that paralysis of initiative. The dead-weight that Buddhism could not lift is laid on our shoulders. Therefore, are we dwellers in tents or bungalows?”—with a gesture toward the group of buildings below.

Windows were alight here and there among the low-roofed cluster about the old temple, with its tier upon tier of roofs—pagoda style—crowned with a slender spire in token of its dedication to Christian worship. As chapel and school it bore witness to missionary effort. These young men were not pioneers in the cause, but

both knew what the price of every inch of ground had been in life-blood.

"No sleep for us tonight, and yet nothing to do."

"Let us reconnoitre the enemy's position," and Innesley motioned toward the palace amid its palm gardens on the hill beyond. White gleamed the pillars and towers in the moonlight, while the entrance lay in the shadow of the archway. Silently the men traversed the winding paths about the open grounds, but there was no sign of life except the sleepy twitter of birds in the shrubbery thick-massed against every wall.

Dr. Carleton spoke impatiently: "What's the use of this prowling? We shall be good for nothing tomorrow. Come, let us homeward—why—what?"

His companion had seemed to halt and then quicken his pace. "Yes, by all means," he assented. "You have, no doubt, had a hard day, and we shall both do the cause a service by getting a little rest."

He was now assured that Carleton had not heard the sound that had so startled him and felt impelled to follow the clue alone.

Having parted with his friend at the latter's door, Roger Innesley had climbed the hill road

for the second time and was creeping stealthily along the palace wall. Every sense was strained forward to catch again that sound echoing yet through his brain. Ah! there it was: "Gr—r—, gr—r—," the rasp of hinge long rusted through disuse. More creaking, and the stubborn casement high above his head swung half open; a flash of misty drapery, and something spatted the pavement at his feet—a tiny packet weighted with a half-blown rose.

The little clock on the mantelpiece chiming the hour of two startled the immobile figure at the desk, with head bent over a scrap of paper spread beneath the study lamp. As he flung back his shoulders in the effort to rise, the light fell full on the face of Roger Innesley, tense and sharp. The hand raised to sweep back the moist locks from his beaded brow was shaking. Strange the havoc these wavering lines in an unformed hand had wrought in the man's peace:

"Sahib Innesley Beloved: My father has hatred very great. He is gone. The pariah syces have come and gone to the hospital. Ayah does not know. She sleeps and sleeps. It must be the English die; but not my beloved master. Vidharra gives him life for his love. She has gold and jewels. Come to the Fountain Court the Place of School. We will fly from the land. Vidharra knows the way. Her love has made her strong and wise."

Love and life! Life and love! What mortal man can thrust such an offering aside ruthlessly? Yet what was the life of a recreant worth; and as for love, was it so lightly won as to be flung to the winds? Love had taught the Hindu maid heroism to o'erleap all bounds of tradition. The vision of her waiting at the fountain was one to wring the strong man's heart. If detected by her father's menials, life-long incarceration would be her certain fate. Any moment she might fall a prey to the pariah syces' fury. Delay was placing Vidharra forever beyond his reach.

The thought drove him forth into the night, panting with the fierce joy of snatching from out of this turmoil peace—the peace of exile.

The English must die. A form, the embodiment of the gifts and graces of the race rose before him. "A woman like Miriam Olcott doomed to heathen slaughter—God forgive me!" And Roger Innesley turned back from the threshold of Nirvana. Headlong with haste, he stumbled at the steps of Dr. Weer's bungalow and, half falling, supported his trembling frame against the railing. If his strength only sufficed to give the warning!

But no need—a low rumble rising to a roar in the direction of the hospital; light fragments of timbers were flying from one corner, and tongues of flame were hungrily licking the window ledges on one side.

Simultaneously the president and his niece appeared in the doorway Roger had so nearly reached, and he shrank into the shadow as both glided past him down the steps and on toward the fire, whither forms were flying from all directions.

The first thought was for the sick in the hospital. The wards being on the opposite side from that where the explosion had occurred, it was possible that the score of bedridden patients might be rescued. Rallying the frightened huddle of native nurses, Miriam Olcott was already directing the men to lift the cots with their helpless tenants through the low windows, whence willing hands bore them to a place of safety. The women were bidden to carry in their arms little children who had tumbled from their beds in terror of the uproar. In her calm mastery this woman, born to command, allayed the fears of the panic-stricken creatures so narrowly snatched from the flames.

The conflagration spread in spite of heroic efforts. Petrol and naptha had been used, and burning brands scattered by the explosions ignited thatched roofs far and near. The temple alone stood intact when the last blaze was extinguished, and there the hospital work was to be carried on for the present. Tents were improvised for temporary shelter, and life in some fashion went on.

It was a very grave, but still undaunted, band that gathered on the morrow to discuss ways and means of rehabilitation. Though the material loss had been great, it was nothing to the humiliation of being victimized by treachery.

“Rajah Sindh,” and Dr. Weer’s tones were sorrowfully gentle, “has but yielded to the Oriental passion for intrigue, fanned by the fancied grudge on his son’s account. Duplicity is the breath of his nostrils. Has he been apprehended?”

“Not yet,” responded Dr. Carleton. “I have spent the morning with his household. Miss Olcott had gone there at the entreaty of Gaschal, who seems to find out everything, to attend Vindhara, and I was summoned. The girl is in a most pitiable condition, on the verge of brain fever. The ayah has been drugged, but appears

almost normal. The pariah rabble is squatting and slinking about as usual—the very incendiaries of last night, probably.”

“Let us give thanks,” said Dr. Weer fervently, “that we can by favor of our means give this child Christian care, thus blessing those that hate us—rather, ministering unto one of His little ones.”

“The Lord has favored us with a miracle in the form of a noble woman,” said Professor Blake warmly. “A moment’s hesitation in dealing with that ward last night, and those poor lives would have gone out in torture. To witness a service like that would make a hero of the veriest craven.”

Roger Innesley had sat apart with downcast eyes seemingly fixed on an official looking document and corresponding envelope which he held in his hand.

“Gentlemen,” he began, rising to his feet, “little has been said of our pecuniary loss, but we realize that we are under the necessity of appealing for aid. My finances have until recently been hampered by partnership litigation. This, from my agent, informs me that our joint mining interests in Wales have been disposed of at what he terms a good figure. My share is

at my disposal, and I can place some five thousand pounds in your hands in three weeks time or less."

"Five thousand pounds! In our hands!" Dr. Weer stood facing the young man, as if he doubted his sanity, and for an instant no one else spoke.

Then out of the general daze a murmur of protest.

"My friends, have you been sharers of our common lot of poverty and peril with me only to refuse to partake of my prosperity? What better use for my poor pelf than to repair the wreckage of your years? No; my mind is made up, and I must ask leave of absence for two weeks. My presence in Calcutta is imperative. The negotiations must be carried on through the foreign exchange, and it will be necessary to cable to London." Like to a penitent scourged for his soul's ease, rather than a liberal-handed benefactor, was the stern-visaged man with glance of fanatic fire. His gentle "Do not thank me!" had in it the subtle silencing quality of appeal.

One month had passed since the burning of Mithratta Mission, and the plot had never been unraveled. Rajah Sindh had not been seen and

his palace stood deserted, as if haunted or plague smitten. Among the tall cypresses of the burying ground rose a third shaft of marble from a new tomb, beside which stood a man and a woman.

They had met there by chance, and at first with the barest civilities. Each had laid a floral offering on the slab that covered Vidharra.

"Ah, I see you, too, have selected half-blown roses for her," murmured Miriam. "What so typical of her young life, just awakening to the light and sunshine!"

"As her teacher," rejoined Roger, "I was touched often with pity for her strivings after the unattainable."

But Miriam had turned away brusquely, even rudely. Innesley hastened to overtake her.

"Permit me to accompany you home. I have something to say to you that I beg you will do me the honor to hear, if no more."

"Pardon my courtesy and abstraction," pleaded the gentle woman's voice. "I was thinking of that sweet young life, crushed and withering like a trodden flower. Oh, that last night, when the opiates had lost all power. In piteous abjection the tortured spirit begged for the peace of Nirvana. 'Oh, to forget,' she whispered, 'for-

get this world, where no one is true. Nirvana, Nirvana!"

The strong man turned pale at this appalling revelation. His tones were not quite steady when next he spoke.

"Piteous indeed, and what a shocking experience for you! Miss Olcott, pardon my presumption, but is it true that you have accepted a position as head nurse in one of the lowland missions, that fever-haunted district that takes its awful toll from our ranks year by year?"

"It is. My work here can be safely intrusted to those who have been apt in training. Down in the valley need is sore. Shall the call of distress go unheeded? The path is plain. To falter would be to sin."

They had reached the steps of the temple and she made as if to ascend, when his passionate exclamation arrested her. Turning, she stood transfixed by that uplifted gaze—famishing, devouring.

"Miriam, this is fanaticism, folly! Think of the priceless heritage you are squandering upon these groveling heathen! Youth, beauty, culture, gifts that should grace civilization of the highest, all to this fetich—this Moloch. My poor fortune was nothing; but have we not done

enough? Accept the deepest devotion of a man's heart and at home, in England, rule his destiny—a man not broken in spirit, nor penniless."

He felt her hands turn cold and free themselves from his grasp and heard a firm:

"No; it can never be."

He was startled to find that she was not looking at him at all, but straight over his head, with eyes fixed on the marble shaft among the distant cypresses. And then Roger Innesley *knew*.

